

The end of Christendom and mission in the local church

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Stuart Murray, in the opening book of his *After Christendom* series, defines post-Christendom as ‘the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.’¹ Although in this time valuable lessons are to be learned from the experience of Christians living in the first three centuries of the Christian church, the present experience of post-Christendom is not to be equated with pre-Christendom: ‘vestiges of Christianity will be scattered across post-Christendom ... dissuading those who associate the Christian story with what they dismiss as an oppressive and failed culture from listening afresh to this story.’² Moreover, while post-Christendom, as with all ‘post-’ words, signifies primarily a time of emergence and cultural turbulence as a new culture forms out of one passing away, David Smith in his *Mission after Christendom* helpfully highlights three defining characteristics of this post-Christendom culture in terms of the challenge this culture poses to the Christian church: *the challenge of secularisation, the challenge of pluralisation and the challenge of globalisation*. Before going on to draw out the concrete implications for mission in the local church, it may be useful to expand a little on these three challenges.

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Smith suggests that, since the dawn of the modern age, *the challenge of secularisation* has faced the church. As the previously unquestioned tenets of Christendom were subjected to the new unquestioned tenets of human reason, so faith lost centre-ground in determining matters of fact and knowledge, and became increasingly privatised. In the 19th century churches suppressed the social dimensions of the gospel in order to retain their status as part of society. This can be seen in the exportation of North American civilisation through 20th century missions based on the assumption of the inherently Christian nature of the West. Christendom thus made Christianity cease to be explosive and became a religious justification for the structural ideology of a particular society. In post-Christendom the church no longer retains its position of influence and therefore has greater freedom to challenge the status quo. How might the Western church critique the secular values of the West and become a truly counter-cultural community?

¹ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom* (Paternoster, 2004), p. 19.

² *Ibid.*, pp.9-10.

The impact of the secularisation of the church is seen most keenly when considering *the challenge of pluralisation* that faces the post-Christendom church. Post-Christendom is a time in which a plurality of cultures present themselves on the church's doorstep to be reached with the gospel. The confrontational approach and militaristic terminology employed by Christendom-minded mission create huge problems when trying to convey the gospel to different cultures, both abroad and in the West. Mission is perceived as a means of extending the (secular) culture of the Western church and of crushing the receptor culture, making Christ *bad news* and not gospel at all. How can local churches incarnate the gospel in the plethora of different cultures that face them, making Christ good news for those cultures?

Finally, Smith highlights *the challenge of globalisation* that faces the church after Christendom. Here there is significant continuity between the inherited and the emerging culture. As Stuart Murray suggests, although 'there are radical differences between modernity and postmodernity ... there is also continuity and reinforcement. Economism, consumerism, individualism, militarism, technological dependency, globalisation and other forces shaping our culture flourished in modernity and persist in post-modernity.'³ Indeed, Walter Brueggemann has suggested that 'military consumerism' is the true metanarrative of contemporary Western society.⁴

The mission of the church, both in the West and elsewhere, has for a long time ridden on the wave of this attempt to secure the prevalence of market capitalism everywhere on the globe. In a culture in which the church no longer occupies her previous positions of power, churches face the real challenge and opportunity of disavowing and undoing the perceived symbiotic relationship between Christian mission and this global system, and of critiquing in a new way an ideology defended by force in which an unfettered free market exploits the poor and creates new forms of social and economic division across the globe. How should churches in the West respond to this challenge and recapture what it is to live out a gospel that is good news for the poor?

Before beginning to answer these questions, we might draw out from Murray's and Smith's analyses four principal effects of the end of Christendom for mission in the local church. (1) *The church is marginalised.* The church is increasingly losing its grip on its positions of authority within society and finds itself more and more on the margins of society. (2) *People are suspicious of the church and its tendency to gain power and influence for itself.* (3) *The Christian story is increasingly unknown.* And (4) *in its place a new metanarrative is arising* in which a.) all other metanarratives are viewed with suspicion, and b.) the 'stealth-metanarrative' of military consumerism is allowed to flourish unchecked.

What are the implications of this new emerging culture for mission in the local church? How might local churches respond to this new situation in which they find themselves? We will attempt to outline four different areas.

Mission and marginality

How must churches respond to the position of marginality in which they now find themselves, excluded from the positions of power and influence they once occupied? A two-part process may be outlined in order for local churches in post-Christendom to disengage from the past and to engage with the post-Christendom culture in a helpful way.

³ Murray, *Church after Christendom*, p. 154.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (Fortress, 1997), p. 718; cited in Murray, *Post-Christendom*, p. 154.

a. Disavowal of previous privilege

Churches must first disavow the positions of privilege and influence they have sought to exploit in the past. This must happen on a number of different levels, such as:

(i) *Refusing to use privileges given to Christian churches.* Privileges such as the presumption that churches are charitable organisations and thus receive significant tax exemptions are to be viewed as vestiges of Christendom, and must be weighed up in the light of the potential damage this could be to a church's witness.

(ii) *Refusing to use imperialistic language.* Talk of 'crusades', 'campaigns', 'missions', 'winning souls for Christ' and other such language linked to the imperial past must be dropped.

(iii) *Dropping all notions of 'parish boundaries' or related terms.* Such notions can too easily be interpreted as territorialism, with church-buildings standing like flags in the soil. Likewise, seeking to prevent mosques and other religious groups from moving into our 'parish' significantly impairs a local church's witness to the local community, suggesting that Christians' rights to belong in a certain area come before those of other faith groups.

(iv) *Disavowing the mentality that 'we have a right to be heard'.* In the same way, churches must call into question their presumptions that they 'have a right to be heard' over and above other faith groups, both in politics and in evangelism. We just embrace sociological pluralism even as we contest philosophical pluralism with the proclamation of Christ's uniqueness and universal lordship.

(v) *The refusal to use impressive church buildings.* Such buildings hark back to a time of Christendom with their ornate architecture and domineering presence. Perhaps the use of church buildings *per se* should be eschewed due to the connotations they bring of a world in which Christianity reigned and oppressed.

However, disavowing the past is only half of the process. The second part involves actively embracing marginality within society.

b. Embracing marginality

The challenges presented to a church on the margins of society are not to be regretted, resisted or resented. Rather, they are to be relished. As Murray writes, his perspective on mission after Christendom

celebrates the end of Christendom and the distorting influence of power, wealth and status on the Christian story. It grieves the violence, corruption, folly and arrogance of Christendom. It rejoices that all who choose to become followers of Jesus today do so freely without pressure or inducements. It revels in a context where the Christian story is becoming unknown and can be rediscovered (by Christians and others). It welcomes the freedom to look afresh at many issues seen for so long only through the lens of Christendom. It anticipates new and liberating discoveries as Christians explore what it means to be a church on the margins that operates as a movement rather than as an institution.⁵

A church on the margins of society is a church following in the way of Christ who lived his life on the margins of society and was finally rejected by society, led out of the city to a place of shame and scandal. Such a church has opportunities for missional engagement that a church at the centre could never have had. It is to these opportunities that we now turn.

Mission and social critique

In Christendom, the capacity for churches to critique the social order was severely limited. Murray highlights a number of ways in which this can be seen:

⁵ Murray, *Post-Christendom*, p.21

- If the Christendom shift offered opportunities for social transformation, it also lured churches away from creative and radical perspectives and ensured their thinking and practice became increasingly conventional.
- Nominal Christianity and the superficiality of church life meant pressure and penalties were required instead of moral influence and exemplary living.
- The church's enhanced social status precluded the church from threatening the status quo.
- Churches often obstructed rather than sought greater social justice. Even when individual Christians promoted social transformation, official church policy and attitudes of church leaders delayed or frustrated progress.
- Controlling attitudes, patronising attitudes and demeaning forms of charity marred many social initiatives.⁶

With the church at the centre of society, evangelism became a call to social conformity. The gospel was no longer a biting social critique, but an endorsement of the status quo. As Murray writes: 'If the gospel is truly good news to the poor, we have not been preaching the gospel, for the rich and powerful have not found it disturbing and the poor have not found it liberating.'⁷ As he goes on to say, citing Ann Morisy, 'power has been the poison that has prevented the institutional church from understanding the gospel.'⁸

As churches embrace post-Christendom and their position on the margins of society, however, understanding the radical social critique of the gospel becomes a real opportunity and a very real necessity. If churches are to make the message of Jesus credible to those around them and to overcome the suspicions of a post-Christendom world littered with the vestiges of Christendom, they must show how the gospel of Jesus, far from endorsing the power structures and injustice of the society in which we live, actually *undercuts* them. Churches' position on the margins offers them a new opportunity both to critique the prevailing social order and to identify with those on the margins. As Jonathan Bartley writes,

In post-Christendom [churches] find themselves in an unfamiliar situation, as a dwindling minority amongst other minorities. This gives them more common experience with other groups who find themselves on the fringes of political life. Rather than a paternalistic perspective, which was often a feature of Christendom, Christians will increasingly see the world from their new position among the marginalised and disenfranchised.⁹

Mission in post-Christendom must involve not just social action and 'need-orientated evangelism' that leaves unjust societal structures intact and uncritiqued. Rather Christians must rediscover the socio-political dimensions of their gospel, calling the structures of society into question and calling sinners to radical counter-cultural living.

But how might churches do this? Some have advocated and pioneered partnerships between the government and faith groups to pursue matters of social justice. Such partnerships benefit the government in an age in which the authority and morality of governments is increasingly called into question, and in which governments are struggling to cope with the diversity of society and pressures of welfare, security and health care

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.240-1.

⁷ Murray, *Church after Christendom*, p.162.

⁸ Ann Morisy, *Journeying Out* (Morehouse, 2004), p. 233, cited in Murray, *Church after Christendom*, pp.162-3

⁹ Jonathan Bartley, *Faith and Politics after Christendom* (Paternoster, 2006), p.155

provision.¹⁰ Churches provide for governments a link to civil society, policy ideas on issues such as debt management and debt relief, a vision for social cohesion and the delivery of social capital – ‘the networks, norms, relationships, values and informal sanctions that shape the quantity and quality of a society’s interactions.’¹¹ Such partnerships give churches the funding they need, legal protection for their initiatives, influence at a governmental level, credibility to the society around them and the social identity as a welfare-provider.

Jonathan Bartley, however, suggests that this approach is flawed for a number of reasons. First, by accepting state funding churches lose control of the message they are proclaiming and appear to endorse government policies and targets. Second, church projects become dependent on the government and thus lose their propensity to critique the prevailing norms of society and the values to which the government subscribes. Third, churches are seen once more as instruments of the state, or as leeches upon the power of the state, using the influence that comes through government to further its own goals. Such efforts may be interpreted simply as attempts on the part of churches to reposition themselves in order to regain the power and influence they lost with the demise of Christendom. As Bartley writes:

Even those who have no wish to try to regain the privileges of Christendom often fail to assess properly their political engagement and the tactics they use, and so exercise influence and power uncritically. ‘The system is there, so why not use it?’ the argument runs. Old habits die hard, too. The church has been used to a ‘governing’ role in the past, and often this means that the methods of engagement it adopts smack of Christendom.¹²

Furthermore such partnerships reveal an underlying belief that churches’ and governments’ goals are in some very real sense the same, a another reflection of the Christendom mentality. The reality, however, could not be more different. Brueggemann’s suggestion – that the true metanarrative of both Christendom and post-Christendom is some sort of military consumerism under the guise of a secular government ruling a plural society – must be taken seriously. Brueggemann’s point is that the dominant Western ideology of the past three hundred years has been an unmoderated free-market capitalism – to be defended with force if necessary – and the pursuit of the national interest above all else, leading to the global exploitation of the poor.

If Brueggemann is right, then not only must churches be free to speak out against the government, but the church is also *unable to trust the government*. Is partnering with government not the kind of yoking oneself with unbelievers against which Paul speaks so openly in 2 Corinthians? Such partnerships cannot last, for where churches speak and demonstrate a gospel that so undercuts the values and norms of the society in which they live, such relationships cannot fail to break down and churches will find themselves marginalised and persecuted by the powers and authorities with whom they are seeking to partner.

Bartley advocates instead a different and rather more radical approach, an approach which he labels being ‘loving enemies’¹³ of the state. This way of conceiving of churches’ relationship to the state has, according to Bartley, the following advantages:

- It does not risk compromising the more ‘prophetic’ voice of the church.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹³ Bartley, p. 215.

- The church has more freedom to propose radical reform rather than simply addressing the negative effects of current policy.
- The church can look at government more realistically and acknowledge its limitations more easily.
- The church will be better able to recognise the injustice and idolatry of government.
- The church will have a better understanding of injustice.
- The church will be much more easily distinguished from the government.
- The church will not have to justify those actions of government that conflict with Christian beliefs.
- Christians should not in any event be allied with power and privilege but should more closely identified with the powerless, the marginalised and the persecuted.¹⁴

But what might this look like in practice? How might the church function as a ‘loving enemy of the state,’ and critique the injustices of the state through its message and its life? We might suggest two principle ways: through (a) *prophetic protest* in the context of (b) a *prophetic community*.

a. Prophetic protest

As Murray suggests, the new situation facing churches requires not ‘pietistic withdrawal’ from society, but ‘fresh thinking about *how* representatives of marginal churches with counter-cultural values engage in political and cultural debate.’¹⁵ Bartley proposes a number of ways that ‘loving enemies’ of government might appropriately do this: through negotiation, through subversion, through challenge, through appeal and through withdrawal. Calling on the example of the influence of radical Anabaptists such as William Gouge on the later movement to abolish slavery within mainstream evangelicalism, he calls Christians to ‘come up with new ideas that seem just as outrageous as the abolition of slavery did in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.’¹⁶

Bartley identifies a number of contemporary idols that churches might speak out against: ‘the national interest’, the nation state, consumerism, militarism, individualism, choice, power, the environment, prosperity and wealth.¹⁷ Above all, churches must not simply pursue matters of justice pertaining to themselves or to other Christians. ‘When the church engages in politics uncritically,’ writes Bartley, ‘it can appear to be little more than a self-interested pressure group, defending and advancing its rights and interest wherever it can.’¹⁸ Rather, Christians must rediscover the pertinence of the gospel to issues unrelated to themselves, even defending the rights of other faith groups and those who might be perceived as their enemies. Submissions, letter-writing, petitions, commissions, statements, reports, surveys, lobbying, protests and civil disobedience are all ways that the church’s voice of prophetic protest might be heard from the margins.

b. Prophetic community

Prophetic protest is only one side of the coin, however. The other is the life of a prophetic community. If churches are to call people to repentance and offer a genuine gospel message of challenge to the powerful and of good news to the poor, then they must offer an alternative community to the world around them. As Bartley writes:

¹⁴ Bartley, pp. 201-2.

¹⁵ Murray, *Church after Christendom*, p. 24.

¹⁶ Bartley, p. 218.

¹⁷ Bartley, p. 220.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

The church can be re-imagined as a political community, but a political community that does not merely replicate the politics of the world around it but lives out a new and unique kind of politics. This means that we have to rethink who we are, who our enemies are and what our mission is. It means we have to consider a witness that incorporates such values as love, generosity, grace and forgiveness as political as well as personal virtues... Today the church has more opportunity to witness than ever before.¹⁹

The church presents a plausibility structure for its message by being a radically different kind of community – a community where God’s eschatological justice and mercy are being worked out here before a watching world.

This alternative community functions in two ways. First, it functions as a *challenge* to the status quo not simply by the words it speaks, but also by the life that it lives. It presents a plausibility structure for its message by being a radically different kind of community – a community where God’s eschatological justice and mercy are being worked out here before a watching world. As Bartley continues:

Post-Christendom allows the church to rediscover itself as an agent of God’s justice [as] a community that ‘does justice’ in a different way to the state and can witness prophetically to the state about justice. The church can say: ‘Give us your prisoners, give us your poor, give us your homeless children and we will look after them.’²⁰

Thus the church does not aim to follow the government’s lead or seek it as a partner. ‘Rather, it urges the government *to consider imitating the church*.’²¹

Second, this alternative community life functions as an *invitation*. It is an invitation to the poor and the vulnerable to experience the good news of the gospel. It invites them to taste an alternative community shaped by God’s justice. But not only this, it is also an invitation to those living the norms of the society in which they live to repent and become truly counter-cultural disciples of the Lord Jesus in an alternative society with radically different values.

This brings us on to the next implication of the decline of Christendom for mission in the local church: mission and community.

Mission and community

In a world where the Christian message has for so long been tied to positions of power and where the proclamation of the gospel is often heard as a call to submit to the authority and power of ‘the Church’, the simple proclamation of the gospel will no longer gain a hearing. The creation of the kind of radically counter-cultural communities outlined above will therefore be a central concern for the mission of local churches. As Stuart Murray writes:

Neglecting the health and inner life of missional communities undermines the confidence of those who are sharing faith with their friends, disenchanting any who begin to belong before they believe and accelerates the exodus of leavers. Building healthy, honest and harmonious communities is a prerequisite for effective mission.²²

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

²² Murray, *Church after Christendom*, p. 165.

Indeed, we may wish to go further. Not only are these kinds of communities needed to instil confidence in believers and to prevent ‘belongers-but-not-believers’ from becoming disenchanting, but the existence of these communities is the means by which people will come to experience concretely the reality of the gospel message in a world in which words mean increasingly little. People must see in our churches ‘the kingdom of God with flesh on’ in all its theological, social, financial, relational and political out-workings.

People must see a *suffering* church. In 1 Peter 3:15 Peter exhorts his readers to be always prepared to give an answer for the hope they have. But that hope, as the surrounding verses make clear, is a hope in Christ in the context of suffering. His message is clear. It is as churches suffer *like* Christ, *for the sake of Christ and with their hope in Christ* that they will provoke the culture around them to ask questions.

People must see a *loving* church. As Jesus declared in John 13, it is as people see Christians loving one another with the same cross-shaped love with which Jesus loved them, that outsiders will know that these Christians are disciples of Jesus.

People must see a *godly* church, a church of people who are ‘like God’ (Ephesians 4:24). This can only be brought about as God brings his people to maturity through Christians speaking the truth to one another in love.

And finally, people must see a *servant* church. This must be true of churches as whole, but in view of the Christendom legacy, church leaders in particular must be seen very visibly to be *servant-leaders*, and not authority-figures. In this way they will commend to the world around them the Christ that they serve who was the ultimate servant-King.

If this is to happen, significant time and energy must go in to the creation of authentic, Christ-centred communities. In a world where simply speaking the words of the gospel each week will no longer cut the mustard, the church on the margins must devote itself to the creation of these kinds of communities. This will mean that devoting time to relationships will be of primary importance. Churches who do not devote time to one another will not suffer together; they will not be communities of real, costly, practical love; they will not grow in holiness as they speak the truth into every aspect of one another’s lives; and their leaders will not be servants but orators.

Churches who do devote time to one another, however, and who do these things together will have the opportunity to be truly phenomenal communities that attract those around them away from the relationally broken culture in which they are living and towards the King they are serving together.

Mission and the centre

This brings us on to our final area to explore: that of the direction of mission in post-Christendom. Stuart Murray suggests that ‘post-Christendom evangelism must be uncoupled from ‘inviting people to church’ and disabused of any lingering feeling others should pay attention to what churches say.’²³ Mission in the Christendom era was ‘exhortation and invitation’ evangelism with the church seeing itself as the centre and summoning those around to come to it, ‘based on a residual guilt about not going to church’²⁴. Now, however, ‘incarnation and explanation’ evangelism is superseding the invitational approach.

For these reasons, Murray and others suggest that we must ‘rediscover the ‘go’ in the Great Commission,’²⁵ and that ‘incarnational forms of

²³ Murray, *Post-Christendom*, p. 230.

²⁴ Graham Cray, *Youth Congregations and the Emerging Church* (Grove, 2002), p. 9; cited in Murray, *Post-Christendom*, p. 231.

²⁵ Murray, *Post-Christendom*, p. 230.

mission are emerging that no longer rely on attractional methods or people eager to belong before they can believe. In these creative and courageous initiatives *centrifugal* mission is replacing *centripetal* mission.²⁶ As he goes on to say, ‘in post-Christendom, incarnational cross-cultural strategies will be needed to reach increasing numbers of pre-churched and anti-churched people.’²⁷

However, there is a tension here that Murray fails to resolve. How can we spend time maintaining the body and yet also be a missional congregation incarnating the gospel in different contexts? How can we ensure that our communities truly are those alternative, radically counter-cultural communities and be reaching out with the gospel? How can we avoid seeing ourselves as the centre and inviting people along to our events and yet expose our world to the phenomenal communities we are seeking to build?

I would suggest that the only way to do this is to take the community to people, to incarnate the gospel in different cultures and to expose the world to our communities by ‘going’ not as individuals but as communities. Rather than hiding our communities away defensively in our homes or our buildings, we must take our communities where people are – among the poor, among the homeless, among the displaced and the marginalised. We must create small, flexible communities that incarnate the gospel by their lives together, taking the gospel message out in the context of a gospel community and into the most broken parts of our society.

Conclusion

This is what mission in the local church must look like after the end of Christendom: simultaneously *centripetal* and *centrifugal*. Our churches must become small, weak, suffering communities who (a) critique, through their gospel message and their radically counter-cultural lives together, the society around them; who (b) go as community and incarnate the gospel across cultural boundaries, and who (c) invite people to become part of these phenomenally Jesus-shaped communities, bowing the knee to the centrifugal-centripetal King who came out of his heaven and died on a cross to draw people to himself.

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²⁶ Murray, *Church after Christendom*, p. 22.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.